

Ups and Downs by HobbitSpaceCase

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Summary:

Steve and Billy buy each other anniversary presents.

Ups and Downs

Author's Note:

This was based off a tumblr prompt from pizzacast, and though it went a little off of what was prompted, I enjoyed writing it.

It's been five years since Billy Hargrove kissed Steve outside the high school gym, tucked away in a corner after graduation and looking at him after with such wide, terrified eyes that Steve had hauled him back in and kissed him some more until the tension melted from his body.

A lot can change in five years, Steve thinks, walking home from work with the Alice Cooper album that came out last fall tucked under his arm.

The blue and khaki police uniform he wears to work has grown familiar, so far away from the suits his dad expected him to wear when he invited Steve in to his office the same day as Billy's kiss and told him, through a disappointed frown, that he'd arranged a job for Steve in his company, one that wouldn't *strain his capabilities too much*. It'd been a relief to tell his dad that he already had plans, that Hopper though he would make a good cop and he wanted to try doing that. There'd been a fight, of course, his father telling him he was throwing his life away on some youthful rebellion while his mother flitted around wondering what her friends with the perfect children going to Harvard and Yale would think, but eventually they accepted it. Cop wasn't exactly the worst job he could have chosen, after all. It was respectable, and maybe Steve just wasn't cut out for intellectual work, his dad finally said, clapping a hand on Steve's shoulder without meeting his eyes.

It hurt, knowing he'd disappointed his dad, but it was worth it every time he solved a case, helped someone, and knew that he was making Hawkins a better place. Billy'd scoffed at him too, told him plenty of stories about cops in LA who never seemed to be around whenever anyone poor needed help, but were there in seconds every time a black man ran a stop light. He'd also held Steve in his arms, though,

and whispered that Steve was the kind of person who should be a cop, the kind of person who wanted to help everyone no matter who they were, and put everything he was into doing the job right. Making Billy proud didn't entirely remove the sting of his dad's disappointment, but it soothed the sharp edges down to something dull and ignorable.

Billy had taken a job at the convenience store where Joyce worked, and that was another thing that had changed. No one batted an eye, these days, at seeing Billy join the rest of the party for dinner or DnD, a game that he apparently was miles better at than Steve. The kids had been shocked, when Billy had joined them for the first time and immediately knew what he was doing, but nowadays it was a long running joke how many times Billy had to rescue Steve from being massacred by dark elves or eaten by swamp creatures or beheaded by trolls. Steve had kind of given up years ago on trying to keep his character out of danger, because one way or another Billy would end up having to save him anyway.

Those were good things that had changed. Steve finding a career that didn't make him feel like a failure and Billy finding a family in the party. The tiny apartment he shared with Billy, the beat up car he drove these days, and the fact that he hadn't bought new shoes in two years even though his were starting to grow holes, those were less good changes. Steve parent's had been disappointed when he'd decided to become a cop, but they'd been furious when he moved in with a man and told them that man was more than just his "friend."

It still shocked him, sometimes, how quickly money went when food and rent and bills were paid. How when his back and arms were sore from hunching over paperwork all week and Billy collapsed into a chair every time he got home from standing all day, they still had so little money left. His dad had always impressed upon him the importance of hard work. Had boasted at Christmas parties with his work friend about how he never would have gotten where he was today if not for his work ethic, pulling long nights at the office to afford four hundred dollar bottles of whiskey and a house full of things no one was allowed to touch. (It had taken Billy snorting and making an offhand joke for Steve to realize that "at the office" might have been a euphemism, that there might have been more than

lonely evenings and exasperation behind the pinched frowns and plastic smiles his mother had alternated between at his father's bragging.)

Steve and Billy both worked hard, he knew they did, but every time a paycheck came in it flowed through his fingers like water. Even if they both gave up sleep and food for work, buying something like the Beemer his parents had taken from him would take years of saving.

The first time Steve spent too much on something stupid (and he hadn't thought it was stupid, the band was Billy's favorite, and he'd been sighing over that concert coming to Indianapolis for *ages*), Billy had lost his temper. Shouted till their neighbor had knocked on the wall and yelled at them to *shut the fuck up!* and then stormed out the door. He'd come back by the time Steve was getting ready for bed, had apologized with his mouth in more ways than one and always tried not to shout anymore, but Steve still felt that hot twist of shame in his gut whenever he wanted to buy something and Billy had to gently remind him that they couldn't afford it.

He's been doing much better this year.

Today, though. Today he can afford something nice. He got a raise two months ago, still flushes pink with pride when he thinks of Hopper clapping a hand to his shoulder and telling him he's doing a good job, and the record is just a record, not expensive concert tickets. He can afford to splurge on a record for Billy today, even if Billy thinks it's silly that Steve always insists on celebrating the day of their first kiss.

"It's not like we're married you fucking sap, or even can get married anyway," he'd said the first year, but his face had gone soft after, and he'd kissed Steve like Steve was the only thing he wanted in the world. In the years since, he's always managed to do something special for Steve in between his grumbling, never forgotten the date even once.

The present in his hands feels heavy anyway, weighing him down with guilt.

The light is already on in the kitchen when Steve gets home, so he

sets the record on the coffee table and walks around the dividing wall between their tiny living room and tinier kitchen. In the kitchen, Billy is humming along to Bon Jovi, stirring something in a pot while his shoulders twitch to the music, his back to Steve. The comfort radiating from his boyfriend makes something soft and happy curl in Steve's chest. Things haven't been easy, but seeing how much happier Billy is these days than he used to be in high school, knowing that he had some part in that, makes Steve feel warm and content all over.

"Hey babe," he says, boots thumping heavily on the floor as he comes up behind Billy. Billy spins around, wooden spoon still in his hand, and a smile lights up his face, blue eyes shining bright in the yellow kitchen light. "What're you making?"

Billy shifts, stance going a little bit less sure. "You said homemade mac'n'cheese was your favorite food, so. Happy anniversary!" he says, waving the cheese covered spoon in the air.

Steve closes the space between them and kisses Billy. "Yeah, it is," he says, feeling like his smile is about to split his face in half. He loves his boyfriend more than anything, and even though Billy doesn't say it in words very often, he says it just fine in other ways.

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They eat on the couch, coffee table pulled up close to hold their plates.

Billy loves his record, kisses Steve till their food starts getting cold when he sees it and then takes more time to slide it carefully in next to the rest of his collection in the bookshelf by the door before he finally eats the food he made.

After dinner, Billy goes all twitchy again.

"Gotcha something else," he says, and Steve feels ridiculously like a little kid on Christmas as he watches Billy go back over to the

bookshelf with his records and pull an envelope out from between Metallica and Mötley Crüe. He makes grabby hands at it, and Billy laughs as he hands it over, a nervous smile on his face.

Steve's face falls as soon as he sees what's inside, and his stomach clenches. "We can't afford this," he says, staring at the two plane tickets to California that are laying in his lap.

"What do you mean?" Billy says, face quirking down into a frown. "Okay yeah, took me ages to save up for it, but I got that raise in March, and you got a raise in April, and... you didn't have any idea how we were doing with money, did you?"

Steve looks away, feels shame twist hot in his stomach again, curling down the base of his spine, but Billy grabs his hands, squeezes, and says, "Fuck," in the voice that means he just realized something he doesn't like.

"Sorry," Steve whispers, but when he looks at Billy, his boyfriend looks like someone just told him his puppy died.

"Shit, Steve," he says, and leans further away, "I'm the one who should be apologizing. I know I can get, well, kind of fucking bitchy about money and shit, but I didn't mean to make you think we can never do *anything* nice cause we're too fuckin' poor to even smile, or something. Fuck. I'm a fucking dick sometimes, okay, but I love your present and I refuse to give it up, and if you wanna bitch at me about the plane tickets I'll understand, but you're gonna love California and I'm not giving up the chance to see you on the beach in tiny shorts either. And we *can* afford this, can probably afford a lot more'n I let on sometimes, but again, I'm a fucking dick. Jesus. I'm sorry."

He's still too far away. In spite of his brave words, Steve knows how to read the uncertainty in the curl of his shoulders and the way his eyes keep darting to different corners of the room. So Steve shifts over, chases Billy's warmth to chase out the lingering cold doubt like a rock in his belly, and kisses him. "I love you," he says against Billy's mouth, "and I'm sorry I'm an idiot. It's going to be the best trip I've ever been on."

“Not as much of an idiot as me,” Billy says, and Steve knows that isn’t true. Billy’s *smart*, had a GPA that blew Steve’s out of the water and could have gone to college if he’d wanted to. Steve stops thinking when Billy’s arms come up to slide around his waist, warm and strong and leaving him shivering happily against Billy’s front.

A lot can change in five years, Steve knows. A lot of things have changed, and he doesn’t regret a single one of them, not when they lead him to a career he loves and boyfriend he loves more and plane tickets to California fluttering to the floor.